Society of American Archivists (SAA)

FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE:
PLANNING A 21ST-CENTURY APPROACH TO
CORE ARCHIVAL KNOWLEDGE

SUMMARY

The Society of American Archivists (SAA) has, since the late 1970s, supported a robust, successful, and influential publishing program. Graduate education programs, governmental and regional training institutes, archival practitioners, and allied professionals have all benefitted from SAA’s practical manuals and more theoretical monographs. Historically, publications have also supported other association programs and educational endeavors. This program is at a key transitional moment. As we now begin to plan the next Archival Fundamentals series, we recognize that technological changes, user demands, and electronic publishing are threatening our program’s sustainability and challenging our traditional business model. The archival, library, museum, and public history disciplines have converged in recent years, generating new user communities. Theoretical and methodological shifts have shortened publication shelf lives and created demands for more rapid and timely dissemination of knowledge. Clearly, the publications program requires significant modification, and the potential solutions have important implications for related professional associations, academic publishers, and organizations engaged in scholarly communication.

We therefore are applying for a two-year $65,574 planning grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) in order to address
the problem. We propose to convene a ten-member Working Group that will conduct an environmental scan, electronically survey both our membership and professionals in related disciplines, conduct a series in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, devise a program to revamp our archival fundamentals series, and produce a long-term business plan that will ensure the publication program’s vitality and sustainability. Our new model will prove adaptable to other associations that face nearly identical issues.

BACKGROUND

The Society of American Archivists is the largest and oldest archival professional association in North America. Its core mission involves serving the education and information needs of more than 5,500 members, and its publications program constitutes a cornerstone in achieving this purpose. Beginning in the early 1970s, SAA published the five-volume set known as the Basic Manual Series, organized around core archival functions. 1 The subsequent growth of the archives profession and related graduate programs in the 1980s led to the seven-volume Archival Fundamentals Series that both replaced and offered a more ambitious agenda than the Basic Manual Series, including a discussion of theoretical principles and techniques that represented the best practices in the field.

The Archival Fundamentals Series had a transformative effect on both the SAA publications program and the profession. Publications sales began to have a substantial impact on SAA’s budget, and every volume in the Archival Fundamentals Series became

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1 The initial Basic Manual Series included works on arrangement and description, appraisal and accessioning, reference and access, surveys, and security. This evolved into the Basic Manual Series II in 1982, which expanded the scope by including volumes on automation, exhibits, public programs, cartographic records and architectural drawings, and reprography. It should be noted that the preparation and publication of the Basic Manual Series, Basic Manual Series II, and the subsequent Archival Fundamentals Series were awarded generous support from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.
a leading seller in a variety of marketplaces. The series established SAA as a book publishing force within the archives profession and provided “seed money” for the production of dozens of other books with smaller distribution footprints that made equally important contributions to the professional discourse. In the late 1990s, SAA updated the popular series through the seven-volume Archival Fundamentals Series II, which proved to be as successful as its predecessor. A variety of technological, theoretical, and institutional factors that converged in the first decade of the 21st century made it clear, however, that the Archival Fundamentals Series II books would have a shorter shelf life than previous series. These factors make this a critical moment for SAA as a publisher, and have stimulated our request that NHPRC fund this planning grant in order to allow us to rethink the core of our publications program, construct a sustainable business model and blueprint for our future, and better meet the needs of our increasingly diverse professional and technologically sophisticated community.

PROJECT’S PURPOSE

There are three compelling reasons why a critical need exists now to develop a new core literature and a new publishing model. The following observations indicate the need for SAA to reach beyond its membership and structure to rethink its approach to providing core archival knowledge. These observations flow naturally from SAA’s Strategic Priority Outcomes and Activities 2010–2013, which emphasizes technology,

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2 The success and proliferation of the SAA publications has led to a contribution of between 18% and 26% of the association’s annual revenue over the past two decades.

3 The seven volumes were Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories (Michael Kurtz, 2004); A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology (Richard Pearce-Moses, 2005); Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts (Kathleen Roe, 2005); Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts (Mary Jo Pugh, 2005); Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts (Frank Boles, 2005); Understanding Archives and Manuscripts (James M. O’Toole and Richard J. Cox, 2006); and Preserving Archives and Manuscripts (Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, 2010).

4 While some publications in the Archival Fundamentals Series II represent the initial steps in SAA’s growing electronic publications program, others involved less radical re-conceptualizations of archival theory, practice, and Web 2.0 applications.
diversity, and advocacy/public awareness as critical issues for the association and the archives profession. A revitalized core literature and an improved method of delivery will enhance archival education and practice.

1. Publishing Environment

Our definition of a successor to the Archival Fundamentals Series II must move forward in a rapidly changing publishing environment that poses significant challenges for professional associations. Archival educators now structure their courses around readily available online resources rather than assigning our series of introductory publications, and their students are accustomed to accessing course material on the Web. Graduate educators increasingly are creating their own online course packs in such content management systems as Blackboard, Sakai, and wikis, and instructors are less inclined to rely solely on professional association manuals. The audience for our publications program has diversified to include a broader range of knowledge and skills. A “one-size-fits-all” approach to core knowledge no longer works. Archivists, like other professionals operating in a web-based informational culture, increasingly rely on rapidly accessible, easily updatable, and cafeteria-style resources tailored to their particular interests. SAA’s publishing program must become more nimble and innovative in order to meet the needs of educators, students, and practitioners. A more thorough understanding of user needs will enable SAA to tailor publication content and delivery to contemporary expectations.

User demands and new publishing models also raise sustainability issues. During the past several years, SAA has struggled to find an appropriate balance between its

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5 See http://www2.archivists.org/governance/strategic-priorities.
electronic and print publications program. In 2005, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* became the first SAA publication to be simultaneously published in two formats: a structured database-driven resource available for free on the SAA website, and a print edition available for purchase. SAA’s website now features such other electronic publications as *Campus Case Studies* (2008 and ongoing), *The Interactive Archivist: Case Studies in Utilizing Web 2.0 to Improve the Archival Experience* (2009), *Thesaurus for Use in College and University Archives* (2009), and an assortment of downloadable files of out-of-print classic archives books. All of this content is freely available. The hybrid print and electronic approach to the publications program has increased our ability to serve as an effective vehicle for scholarly communication, but it has also introduced the challenges of quality-control and sustainability. The aforementioned Glossary best illustrates the quality-control issue. No mechanism was developed for adding content, updating entries, or correcting errors. Although the original glossary compiler has been maintaining a list of entries to add, we lack a process for responding to his efforts. As we move toward an online publishing environment, we must create workable procedures for updating not only the Glossary but also our entire body of core literature.

Sustainability raises even more complex and wide-ranging challenges. Robert B. Townsend, Assistant Director of Publications and Research at the American Historical Association, has observed that e-publishing has allowed his association to reach a much broader audience, but that the cost of reaching that audience has significantly diminished the association’s revenue stream.6 Donald Waters, Program Officer for Scholarly Communications and Information Technology at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, has

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urged publishers and professional associations to move toward an “open access” model, but he also has admitted that infrastructure issues prevent these institutions from adopting his recommendations. 7 SAA must develop a business plan for core literature that considers a variety of strategies and models, which include cross-institutional collaboration, publishing cooperatives, and cost-containment. We cannot merely continue our traditional monograph publication program (which owed its creation to the cultural and business climate of the 1970s) and expect to survive in a far different social and technological world. A robust planning process, which is beyond SAA’s institutional capacity to undertake and implement, will help us develop a sustainable business model consistent with the new publishing paradigm. Because the scholarly communications paradigm shift affects all professional associations, our work will produce a business plan that other associations and content producers will be able to adapt.

2. Content

The Archival Fundamentals Series II sought to be more open-ended and to draw on a richer and deeper theoretical context than its predecessors. Its production in the early 2000s, however, proved inauspicious for several reasons, making it imperative that SAA move quickly to launch a successor series.

First, though the World Wide Web dates to the mid-1990s, and observers certainly noted its transformative impact on archival practice by the time of the

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appearance of Archival Fundamentals Series II, most volumes only touched lightly on such issues as electronic records management and digital technology. Second, and even more critical, the volumes appeared on the cusp of new technological and theoretical transformations, such as social networking, that have revolutionized the profession. O’Reilly Media’s “Web 2.0 Summit” in 2004, for example, gave popular currency to the term “Web 2.0” just as the first Archival Fundamentals Series II book on management appeared in print. Since that date, tagging, social bookmarking, blogging, image-sharing, social networking, micro-blogging, and similar practices have contributed to a new vision for archival reference and research environments, prompting all sorts of intriguing professional experiments. These important trends are understandably absent from Archival Fundamentals Series II. Similarly, Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner published their article, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing” shortly after the appearance of Kathleen Roe’s *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*. Their article generated passionate discussion at professional conferences and revolutionized accepted best practices for arrangement and description. Greene/Meissner procedures now routinely appear in funding proposals and guidelines; yet, our core professional literature does not reference this work. It is essential that SAA develop a mechanism for incorporating new trends more rapidly into our publications program.

Finally, discussions concerning “the archive” in a variety of social sciences and humanities disciplines have generated new ways of thinking about archival practice.

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8 A 2005 *Archival Issues* review of *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, for example, noted that the book “completely avoids the problem and challenges of electronic records.” Frank Boles’s *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* devotes only three pages to a sustained discussion of electronic records, which tellingly appears in a chapter that discusses such “other media” as audio, film, and visual image. Michael Kurtz’s *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories* contains a mere handful of references to electronic mail (which he primarily discusses as a communications tool of managers) with only one brief index entry for “web technology.”

Historians, literary critics, digital humanists, poststructuralists, cultural studies scholars, and performing arts theorists have all contributed to these academic debates, yet their insights remain absent from the archival literature. The archival educator Terry Eastwood hinted at this issue when he wrote of the need for a publication concerning “archival knowledge” and criticized the Archival Fundamentals Series II for virtually ignoring international insights and failing to address “the activities of making, organizing, using, keeping, and disposing of records.” The emergence of theory-based journals such as Archival Science (2001); the growing discussions about convergence among libraries, museums, and archives; and the appearance of books such as Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory illustrate these new trends. As these publications also demonstrate, archival literature must draw upon and contribute to a growing and sophisticated multidisciplinary base.

3. Audiences

Our audience has also undergone an important transformation. The data from the “Archival Census & Education Needs Survey in the United States” (A*CENSUS), a comprehensive nationwide survey of the archives profession in May 2004, provides important insights that inform this proposal. Perhaps the most relevant conclusion is the extent to which graduate archival education has transformed the field. Structured MA, and especially MLIS, programs have rapidly multiplied in the past two decades, replacing workshops and institutes as the primary point of entry into the profession. Further, “students” comprise the largest single membership category within SAA, which has 32

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affiliated student chapters. Multi-course graduate education programs require a different approach than the Archival Fundamentals Series II offers. In 2009, SAA surveyed archival educators and found that few professors assign the series to their students; rather, educators select from the rich periodical literature, seek out more theoretically sophisticated resources, and prefer affordable single-volume professional overviews. Our “traditional” approach to publishing no longer resonates with the most important and expanding cohorts in our audience: graduate archival educators and graduate students.

A*CENSUS also informs us that the archives profession includes a growing number of practitioners with limited experience: more than 43 percent of the respondents had worked as an archivist for fewer than 10 years, which indicates that the need for core knowledge and foundational texts remains vital for working archivists. Training programs, such as the Modern Archives Institute, the Western Archives Institute, the Georgia Archives Institute, and the Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists Biennial Conference, continue to educate government employees, tribal archivists, and religious archivists. These programs seek sound literature that provides core archival knowledge. SAA has an obligation to serve all these audiences.

Finally, the convergence of disciplines in recent years means that we must develop and market our core literature offerings beyond SAA members. Digital technology has fostered greater visibility for archival and manuscript collections in local libraries. Special collections have assumed more significance within academic libraries as they have sought to highlight their original materials in an era of full-text databases and shared resources. Public historians have incorporated archival materials into Web exhibits and created such digital archives as the September 11 and Hurricane Katrina
sites. Archives have partnered especially with social studies educators to tie their on-line collections more closely to state and national standards and to create document-based curriculum materials around their resources. SAA must provide ready access to its core publications for the librarians, public historians, educators, and others who incorporate archival materials into their daily work. Furthermore, we must reach out to our colleagues who manage historical resources in a variety of settings; and more effectively solicit input from members of allied organizations.13

To reach this broader audience, we need to experiment with more effective delivery mechanisms. SAA has historically marketed products primarily to its own membership and to professionals who self-identify as archivists. We need to develop both better resources and a more effective means of reaching librarians, records managers, cultural resource managers, public historians, historical society personnel, and museum curators. The business plan that results from this project will delineate a process for creating and enhancing our core literature, and develop a strategy for marketing our products to diverse audiences across professional boundaries in order to disseminate knowledge more effectively and ensure the sustainability of SAA’s publishing program.

**LONG-TERM GOALS AND MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES**

We propose to address these needs through a dynamic 24-month planning process. We will convene a Working Group comprised of 10 individuals who represent diverse segments of the profession, have complementary skills including survey development and data analysis, and have proven their commitment to the profession

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13 Letters of support from the following organizations may be found in the supplementary materials: Academy of Certified Archivists, Association of Canadian Archivists, American History Association, Council of State Archivists, and National Council on Public History.
through innovative research and writing, collaborative style, and hard work. This group will:

1) Attend two national archival meetings (e.g., Society of American Archivists and Association of Canadian Archivists), seven regional/local archival meetings (e.g., Midwest Archives Conference, Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, New England Archivists, Archivists Round Table of Metropolitan New York, Society of Southwest Archivists, Society of California Archivists, and Northwest Archivists), and three allied professional meetings (e.g., American Association of State and Local History, National Council on Public History, Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries) to solicit input from attendees.

2) Conduct an online survey available to approximately 6,000 archivists, librarians and public historians, and making sure to obtain a statistically valid response rate.¹⁴

3) Contact 60 key professionals in the archives, public history, information, and scholarly publishing disciplines for in-depth phone interviews (one-hour long; questions to be sent ahead of time for consideration).

4) Create a wiki to facilitate sharing of data for public review and comment.

5) Use the data and feedback to build a business plan and produce a report for project implementation with a framework/roadmap for the new series.

6) Disseminate the report to the archives community, library community, public history community, and allied professional associations with publishing programs by posting announcements on H-Net listservs and linking to SAA site.